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The Evolution of the 'Populist Potential' in European Politics: From New Right Radicalism to Anti-System Populism

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Abstract Over the past 30 years, responding to different international, political and economic circumstances, populists have formed, preserved, nurtured and expanded a political identity that is today present in most political systems in Europe. This identity constitutes a 'populist potential', in the sense that it is non-ideological and that it wavers between electoral abstention and support for anti-system parties. This essay provides a historical overview of the ideological and sociological evolution of the populist identity in Europe and reviews the ways parties of the centre–right have dealt with it in the past. Its conclusion is that practices like coalition building and theme co-optation are not so easy to deploy today, given the non-ideological and anti-system nature of the populist potential.

Keywords Populism – Radicalism – Crisis – Radical right – Coalition – Co-optation

Introduction

This article will provide a short historical account of the rise and success of populism over the past four decades in order to distil some conclusions about the persistence and the nature of the populist challenge. It will argue that most European societies today are characterised by the existence of a 'populist potential', a significant part of the electorate that encompasses voters who actively subscribe to a populist, anti-establishment ideological identity together with voters who have stepped out of the party system altogether. This populist potential is energised by different discourses, takes many shapes and combines references to authoritarian ideological heritages with an ever-growing anti-political ethos. This article will argue that this populist potential is today a

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permanent fixture. It will also argue that, among moderate parties, the centre–right in particular has been the most effective in countering the populist challenge. Today however, the centre–right's strategic position is both privileged and precarious, a function of its sustained strength within a political system that is rapidly losing collective legitimacy.

Phase 1, 1980s: the new radical right rises, the populist potential materialises

There were outbursts of populist politics in the post-war period in Western Europe, but they were swiftly contained under the weight of robust party systems that performed fairly well the basic functions of party democracy (mobilisation, incorporation and representation of interests, and the recruitment and training of political elites). This was the golden age of party politics, when political parties represented political identities mobilised around a few dominant dimensions of opposition or cleavages (Bartolini and Mair 1990). This era came to a close in the 1980s, when a new crop of populist politicians, with roots in the far right authoritarian tradition of Western European politics, made their appearance.

This new radical right represented the effort of the heirs of discredited authoritarian traditions to update their image and message at times of newly encountered economic hardship. Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the National Front (Front National, FN) in France, and Jörg Haider, leader of the Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ), were the most successful and persistent exponents of a populism that targeted corrupted elites and immigrants as responsible for a perceived economic and moral crisis. This ethnic populism was an updating of old far right traditions, of course, but the policy message was still unique because it was adapted to new social conditions. The new radical right responded to a perceived breakdown of authority and social order, thus attracting primarily people with an outlook that combined cultural authoritarianism and a sense of economic insecurity (Minkenberg 2000). In response to their

needs, the new radical right's populism combined a pronounced anti-immigrant discourse with a vocal neo-liberal populism, thus creating what political scientist Herbert Kitschelt had called 'the winning formula' of the populist right (Kitschelt 1995).

In terms of outlook, the new radical right of the 1980s could be seen as a radicalised wing of the broad conservative family. Its following was mostly middle class, albeit the part of the middle class that felt most vulnerable economically and culturally. Nevertheless, it also signalled a qualitative change in party competition in Western Europe in that its ethnic populism was particularly mobilised against New Left demands (about minorities, personal lifestyles and so on). While this radicalisation of a cultural axis of competition, pitting authoritarians versus social liberals, was still subsumed under the traditional socioeconomic left–right divide, the radical right had carved out a political area characterised by economic and cultural alienation, a veritable new political identity energised by an anti-establishment, yet still quite ideological, populism (Minkenberg 2000).

Phase 2, 1990s: the new radical right consolidates and expands the populist potential

The end of the Cold War and the advent of globalisation only served to galvanise the radical right political identity. The sense of cultural alienation was compounded by the erosion of national sovereignty in a world of free movement of people, goods and services. The radical right's Euroscepticism (which was not very pronounced during the 1980s) became a marker for these parties' opposition to the weakening of the nation state (Taggart 1998). Concurrently, these parties' anti-elite populism was underpinned by the popular perception that, in an integrated Europe and a globalised world, there are few things elected governments can do. In this context, traditional political identities began to erode, but populists of the right could hold their own by subsuming anti-establishment

themes into a loose political milieu whose core was still authoritarian-conservative but whose veneer was attracting more and more newcomers.

During the 1990s, anti-immigrant and anti-elite discourses remained the staple of the new radical right but crucial elements in its outlook began to change. In various countries (notably France and Austria) right-wing populists began to attract the support of people from beyond the core of the authoritarian middle-class right. The radical right maintained the main elements of its laissez faire economics, yet it started making inroads into the working-class and youth vote by overcompensating on issues of law and order, sovereignty and cultural–ethnic alienation. The populist potential was still anchored on the right, but its membership was becoming sociologically varied and ideologically diffuse, with principled far right orthodoxy giving way to a general discontent with politics as the glue of the coalition (Mayer 2002). The entry of Haider's FPÖ into the Austrian government in 2000 marks the apex of this period.

Phase 3, 2000s: identity politics meets protectionism

By the early 2000s mainstream parties seemed to have converged to a point of acceptance of the basic tenets of economic and cultural openness (Kriesi et al. 2006, 926). Increasingly, the populist potential was losing its character as an authoritarian offshoot of the right wing. Radical right populists aligned their rhetoric more and more to the emerging cleavage between globalisation's winners and losers. For heirs to old authoritarian traditions in France and Austria, this meant an exit from their comfort zone of vulnerable middle-class authoritarianism. The targeting of immigrants and law and order was combined with an ever more protectionist discourse on economic matters. It is not to be denied that the defining parameter of the populist potential in these countries remained culturally and ethnically authoritarian (Kriesi et al. 2006, 929). But populist leaders became much more explicit in their courting of the parts of the population that tangibly felt the externalities of economic openness (Azmanova

2011). Programmatically, this meant that by the mid-2000s the FN and the FPÖ had shed their neo-liberalism (Bornschier 2011, 40), something that facilitated the amazing inroads both parties made into the working class vote, as well as their ability to mobilise people otherwise disenchanted with politics altogether (Knapp 2004).

Strategically, this was expressed in the energising by populist parties of a protectionism–openness axis beyond the left–right divide, with the populist potential now forming the third peak in a triangle of competition pitting cultural and economic protectionists against the pro-openness centre–right and centre–left. Discussions about whether the FN had triangulated the French party system were indicative of this move (Grunberg and Schweisguth 2003). The acrimonious exit of the FPÖ from government in Vienna in 2006 completed its own transition from a party of neo-liberal and authoritarian conservatism to one of populist protest incorporating working-class demands for protection (Luther 2008).

The populist potential came to be captured by new types of actors. Some anti-immigrant parties gave a cultural–ethnic spin to liberal values of tolerance and liberal democracy. In the context of the ‘war on terror’, these parties mobilised along cultural lines while appropriating liberal themes. This was a new recipe for success in countries with thin authoritarian traditions, such as the Netherlands and Denmark (Andersen 2007). Elsewhere, the diminishing ideological component of the populist potential allowed, for the first time, parties on the left to employ populism and capture part of the action. In Germany and the Netherlands, successful left-wing populist parties like the Left (Die Linke) and the Socialist Party (Socialistische Partij, SP) swapped traditional working-class radicalism for an inclusive appeal to middle-class and to non-ideological voters (March 2011). Finally, an altogether different breed of populism was becoming evident in Central and Eastern Europe, especially after the 2004 EU enlargement. There, under the influence of the Communist legacy, a populist potential combining authoritarian right-wing and protectionist left-wing themes

has been formed, for example the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) in Poland.

Phase 4, 2010s and the crisis: between triangulation and anti-politics

The economic crisis in Europe marks important points of continuity and change in the development of the populist potential. In terms of continuity, it supplies populist politicians who were already strongly anti-elitist, Eurosceptic and protectionist with the opportunity to intensify these themes with the aim of capturing a bigger share of an electorate that is increasingly disenchanted with politics. In terms of change, it signifies a moment of crisis of such magnitude that the very essence of liberal representative democracy is challenged.

Elections in the eurozone since 2010 testify to the fact that the populist potential now constitutes an identity mobilised primarily by opposition to mainstream parties as such. Reflecting the radical right's essential role in its initial formulation, the populist potential still exhibits a strong cultural protectionism. Yet in the current context this cultural component merges with a strong anti-elite and economically protectionist discourse to form a coherent anti-system message whose expression is only vaguely modified according to the ideological tradition of this or that leader. It seemed that in countries with both right-wing and left-wing populist parties, the two sides were competing as much in unison against the centre as they were between themselves to capture the same target audience that was experiencing middle-class disappointment, working-class alienation and youth exclusion. This was the case in 2012 with elections in France, the Netherlands and Greece. In Finland, on the other hand, the euro itself became an issue that allowed the emergence of a populist party advancing Eurosceptic and protectionist themes in 2011.

Table 1 2012 Election results in four eurozone members

	Finland, parliamentary elections (April 2011)	France, first round presidential elections (April 2012)	Netherlands, parliamentary elections (September 2012)	Greece, parliamentary elections (June 2012)
Populist potential	19.1% (PS)	29% (Le Pen and Melenchon)	19.8% (PVV and SP)	46% (SYRIZA, ANEL, Chrissi Avgi, KKE)
Centre–right	24.4% (KOK and KD)	27.2% (Sarkozy)	8.5% (CDA)	29.7% (ND)
Centre–left	19.1% (SDP)	28.6% (Hollande)	24.8% (PvdA)	18.5% (PASOK, DIMAR)
Abstention	29.4% (-2.6% from 2007)	20.5% (+4.3% from 2007)	25.4% (+0.8% from 2010)	37.5% (+8.5% from 2009)

Sources: Data adapted from official election results available at the Greek Ministry of the Interior, www.ypes.gr, the Dutch Central Election Bureau, www.kiesraad.nl, the French Ministry of the Interior, www.interieur.gouv.fr, and the Finnish Ministry of Justice, www.vaalit.fi.
Note: *Finland*: PS = Perussuomalaiset (True Finns), KOK = Kansallinen Kokoomus (National Coalition), KD = Kristillisdemokraatit (Christian Democrats), SDP = Suomen Sosialidemokraatinen Puolue (Social Democrats); *Netherlands*: PVV = Partij voor de Vrijheid (Freedom Party), SP = Socialistische Partij (Socialist Party), CDA = Christen-Democratisch Appèl (Christian Democratic Appeal), PvdA = Partij van de Arbeid (Labour Party); *Greece*: SYRIZA = Synaspismos tis Rizospastikis Aristeras (Coalition of the Radical Left), ANEL = Anexartitoi Ellines (Independent Greeks), Chrissi Avgi = Golden Dawn (neo-Nazis) KKE = Kommounistiko Komma Ellados (Communist Party of Greece), ND = Nea Dimokratia (New Democracy), PASOK = Panellinio Sosialistiko Kinima (Panhellenic Socialist Movement), DIMAR = Dimokratiki Aristera (Democratic Left).

Such is now the potency of the populist potential, a mass wavering between political apathy and rage, informed less by prior ideological commitments than by a general anti-ethos, that new actors can dissect it and mobilise it by appealing to new issues altogether. The most recent example of this is the spectacular success of comedian Beppe Grillo in the Italian elections of February 2013. His movement represented a general dissatisfaction with the whole political class and mistrust in the traditional structures of political representation. Grillo's success dwarfs the moderate inroads made by Pirate parties, mainly in Germany, where a new political identity was put forth around issues of new technologies and radical demands for accountability in political decision-making.

The above examples show that the populist potential has by now escaped confinement on one side of the right–left axis of competition. It currently stands somewhere between the centre–right and the centre–left as the third peak of a tripolar space of competition (Kriesi et al. 2006, 950–1), and lying outside of party politics altogether, waiting to be energised by the right combination of circumstances and charismatic leadership. In some countries, like France, the populist right's head start in introducing and shaping the populist potential means that it is still able to harness most of its support and set the tone of its political expression. In countries like Italy and Greece, the decades-old pervasive populism in the practices of mainstream parties is superseded by a mobilisation against the system as such, a kind of anti-populist populism.

The centre–right and the populist potential: the limits of coalition and co-optation

When they first started, radical right parties seemed to be cutting straight into the support of moderate centre–right parties. But the less ideological and more broad the populist potential became, the more the centre–left started suffering losses. Most importantly, by virtue of their double function as ultra-right offshoots and as expressions of discontent, radical right parties served to realign the balancing

point towards the right in various countries over the past 20 years. As expressions of discontent, they attracted many voters who, based on their class background, would have voted for labour parties in the past. But as principled opponents of the increasingly social-liberal centre–left and New Left (Bornschier 2011), they usually did not escape their initial self-placement within the broad conservative pole of the party system.

The early 2000s witnessed a barrage of victories of centre–right parties that formed governing coalitions with the radical right (Austria, Italy, Norway, and Netherlands). In other cases, the centre–right co-opted many of the themes populists put on the agenda, especially on issues of immigration and public order, incorporating legitimate public demands in moderate agendas (Kriesi et al. 2006). This allowed for the support of populists to ebb (as Sarkozy managed to do with Le Pen in 2007), or for the emergence of populist parties to be pre-empted altogether (for example, in Germany) (Kriesi et al. 2006, 940). The almost simultaneous denunciations of multiculturalism by Angela Merkel and David Cameron in 2011 were the high point of this strategy.

Unfortunately, the ensuing financial crisis reconsolidated the populist potential around protectionist themes and, even more significantly, allowed it to harness a renewed non-ideological populism that challenges the very basis and legitimacy of representative democracy. This reincarnation of the populist potential poses new awkward questions to established parties.

Some of the new anti-system parties seem to be mobilised around specific issues, for example Pirate parties around new technologies and information. As was proven in the demonstrations against the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), this mobilisation puts new demands into the public agenda that are barely susceptible to the cognitive short cuts provided by the left–right axis. Put simply, these new-issue parties are strange animals, a bit like the early-1980s Greens. But because they are mobilised around issues (demands for

extreme transparency and real time online accountability), one can hope that their political identities will eventually restructure or be subsumed under existing patterns of competition, in the process rejuvenating the political game.

But this is an optimistic scenario that applies only to issue conscious anti-system parties like the Pirates. As Beppe Grillo showed, demands for online accountability and direct democracy are much more potent when moulded in a language of radical anti-liberal dissent. Here, the issue around which mobilisation occurs is not positive (support for more transparency and new technologies for improvement of democracy), but negative (a vitriolic opposition against everything and everyone in charge, at home and in Europe). Grillo created a populist potential almost ex nihilo in Italy—his vote drew almost equally from left, right and non-affiliated voters. In other places the anti-system rage can be harnessed by neo-Nazis with experience in grassroots organisation (Greece), or, of course, by fresher expressions of the old and tested radical right, as happened with Marine Le Pen's very successful anti-euro campaign in 2012. It really depends on the national context, the opportunities that party competition offers and the mistakes the ruling political class makes. In all these cases, there is little space for constructive engagement or coalition making: opposition to the system is the essence of the populist potential, and populists want to be sure that discontent is channelled in their favour in elections instead of feeding abstention.

Apart from coalition making, the co-opting of themes by the centre–right is also much more difficult than before. First, populists today are almost totally given to a protectionist economic discourse. While cultural conservatism was easier to co-opt for Christian Democratic and conservative parties, it is impossible for these parties to pre-empt protectionism and Euroscepticism without losing credibility. Second, and most important, in an integrated eurozone facing huge imbalances and tension between creditors and debtors, co-optation of populist themes in one country inescapably has repercussions elsewhere. Unfortunately, cultural values are diffuse and intangible; they can be shared, traded or altered virtually. But

economic resources, unlike values, are finite. Laying claim to a resource, unlike a value, means that someone else will have less of it. At least inside the eurozone, mainstream parties function under very tight constraints. They cannot be seen to give in too much to their creditors (or debtors) before populists at home start to rise up, yet catering to populist sentiments at home feeds discontent on the other side of the creditor–debtor divide.

Conclusion: no easy way out—but a way nonetheless

If one observes the political landscape in Europe, one will see that the centre–right remains electorally dominant in most national settings. But this is a function more of the fact that other established forces, like social democracy and the centre–left, have suffered severe losses in the past decade. A closer observation would show that in most European party systems a significant part of the electorate is de-aligned from any permanent political identification and feels completely unrepresented by the stakes and terms of the discussion.

This short historical overview shows that national context and political leadership allowed the nature of the populist potential to evolve from an ideological to an anti-establishment ethos. Today, the economic crisis and the crisis of European integration have created a more or less uniform social outlook of the populist potential across Europe, an outlook characterised by social and class heterogeneity, where ethnic authoritarianism is only one element next to economic protectionism and plain mistrust (or disgust) of politics, where right-wing and left-wing themes merge seamlessly and where the expression of them wavers between abstention and support for old or new populists. Non-ideological and non-classifiable, a mirror image of insecure middle-class societies, unpredictable, torn between the breakdown of traditional identities and the need to rebuild a sense of collectivity in the face of global competition, such is the populist potential in a Europe in crisis.

Under these circumstances, forcing populists to share in government responsibilities is difficult (either because their demands are completely new and, so far, non-absorbable, or because their populism is so non-ideological and anti-system that entering government would be a negation of their existence), and co-opting their demands causes strains in the management of the European project. However, if we understand the nature of the populist potential as a breeding ground of a new cultural authoritarianism that combines mistrust of representative institutions with opposition to economic openness, as I do in this article, we can at least begin to conceive of ways outside of partisan tactics to, if not counter the electoral rise of populists, at least make the democratic game itself more appealing.

Perhaps the main conclusion to draw from this analysis is that today's populist potential is mobilised less by specific ideological grievances than by a general discontent with democratic politics as such. This is unfortunate but it contains some seeds of opportunity. It potentially lays the burden not so much on an immediate delivery of policy outputs that are difficult and complicated to achieve (for example, drastic improvement of the economic climate), but on the creation of structures, institutions and practices that at least invite renewed popular participation and facilitate social input in policymaking processes.

Politicians of mainstream parties understandably raise objections against measures that could bring about sub-optimal results, such as referenda, or that decrease the overall degree of experience possessed by political personnel, such as term limits for members of parliament. Yet considering these and other measures that will signal to electorates new mechanisms for participation and will increase the responsiveness of elites to societal demands is a relatively cheap way to renew the compact between societies and politics in Europe. It may not satisfy the urge of the populist potential for easy solutions 'right here, right now', but it will at least effectively counter the ongoing transformation of public

discontent with party politics into authoritarian anti-political (and, potentially, anti-democratic) projects.

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